PHD SYNOPSIS

Assessing Ecotourism Potential in the Protected Areas of Chhattisgarh

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SYNOPSIS

Introduction

Protected area management in India has followed a protectionist approach, implemented by Government agencies. Although the focussed approach to conservation resulted in remarkable wild species recoveries, conflicts between local communities and Government agencies was on the rise (Banerjee, 2012). To rectify this situation, the concept of 'eco-development' was formulated and the focus shifted to sustainable development of resources through initiatives like ecotourism. However, this did not completely address the problem as the traditional rights of local communities were not acknowledged. The question is "can the interest of the poorest members of a society be served by promoting the expectation of a global industry that is founded on inequalities" (Scheyvens et al., 2008).

The Chhattisgarh State, carved out of erstwhile Madhya Pradesh, has one of highest share of Scheduled Tribes, accounting for 30.62% of the total population (Sen, 2004). The state is also gifted with the most pristine and abundant set of natural resources in the country with a recorded forest area of 59,772 sq.km, which covers 41% of the geographical area. 4.93% of forest area forms the protected area network of the state. (Chhattisgarh Govt. website).

Scope and Problem Statement

Owing to its rich natural heritage, the state has immense potential to tap the ecotourism resources available in its protected areas. However, it still has the highest poverty rate in the country, with 40% of its population below the poverty line. Given the huge percentage of tribal population in the state, the high incidence of income poverty among them is a matter of serious concern (Sen, 2004). This in turn has led to mass seasonal migrations. The state is also epicentre of the Maoist Red Corridor (Banerjee, 2017).

The latest amendment to Forest Conservation Act, 1980 in 2023, has removed "ecotourism" from the list of "non-forestry activities", thus increasing the scope of community based ecodevelopment in the state. Previous studies, however, show a need to tread with caution. Balancing conservation and economic goals of ecotourism is challenging. It is against this backdrop that the present study has been undertaken.

Literature Review

Since the 1980's, ecotourism emerged as the fastest growing tourism segment in the world with an average annual growth rate of 14.9% in India. The major issues that plague ecotourism is changing land use patterns, over-exploitation of fragile areas, non-involvement of local communities, shortage of funds and conflicting tourism policies (Kumar, 2013). As many as 82% of ecotourism ventures in the world were found to be unsustainable and made no positive contribution to conservation (Kruger, 2005). Preservation of culture and tradition of local communities is as important as the economic benefits derived (Subramaniam, 2008). However, one must come to terms with the fact that, impact is inevitable and avoiding impact is not an option unless all recreation use is curtailed. The unique combination of rich forests and tribal diversity makes Chhattisgarh a state with immense ecotourism potential, which it is yet to realise, due to problems like remoteness, extremist activities, lack of publicity, haphazard tourism development and non-recognition of traditional community rights over resources. For ecotourism to achieve its stated purpose, a drastic and fundamental change in attitude towards ecotourism is essential. True benefits to the environment and society will accrue only when local communities are made central to the tourism enterprise. This will require a paradigm shift in the way we perceive natural resources and people (Equations, 2011). Designing an ecotourism experience as an interpretation and including components that deliver a conservation message, without adversely affecting the ecology of the area, should be the guiding principle for ecotourism management (Lyngdoh, 2017).

Objectives

•Assess the socio-economic sustainability of ecotourism activities in the protected areas of Chhattisgarh.

•Compare the ecotourism policy of Chhattisgarh with the ecotourism policies of other states in India based on their percentage compliance to the national ecotourism policies and guidelines.

•Study various successful ecotourism management models of India, in terms of ecological, socio-economic and visitor awareness value.

Study Areas

Three protected areas in Chhattisgarh, namely, Achanakmar Tiger Reserve, Kanger Valley National Park and Barnawapara Sanctuary have been selected.

Research Methods

The socio-economic sustainability of ecotourism activities was analysed through study of current ecotourism management practices been followed in the protected areas and the perception of the stakeholders who are directly and indirectly involved in ecotourism. The stakeholders include protected area managers, field staff, tourists, local communities, safari drivers, guides, eatery and resort owners. Data collection was through secondary and primary sources. Open and close ended questionnaires were administered to the stakeholders to gather information. Focus group discussions were conducted with members of ecodevelopment committees. The sample size is based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) model. All responses were categorized using excel. Bi-variate frequency table, cluster bar-chart and chi square test were used for the analysis. P value of less than 0.05 was taken as the level of significance. A total of nineteen successful ecotourism models in India were analysed based on a study by ATREE (2006) to identify the best practises that can be adopted from each of these models. The information was collected through secondary sources. The central ecotourism guidelines and the ecotourism policies of fourteen different states of India were analysed based on three broad characteristics namely, resource protection, involvement of local people and creation of awareness among visitors (Kumar, 2013). Information was collected from secondary sources.

Results and Discussions

The results of the study have been documented at two levels namely the protected area management level and the policy level.

Protected area management level:

- All the three protected areass have clearly demarcated ecotourism zones with permissible carrying capacities identified. The zonation in Barnawapara is unscientific as more than 82% of the total area is under the ecotourism zone. Tourism inside Kanger Ghati is much higher (1,00,000 visitors/ annum) than the calculated carrying capacity (50,000 visitors/ annum). However, in Achankmar and Barnawapara, the visitor numbers are very low (6323 visitors/annum against a carrying capacity of 1,04,580 visitors/annum in Achanakmar and 14339 visitors against a carrying capacity of 65000 visitors/annum in Barnawapara). The exorbitant visitor charges and lack of sufficient accommodation facilities could be the main reason for this.

- Tourists are predominantly from Chhattisgarh, well educated, day visitors, first timers interested in visiting again.
- The logistic support, interpretation facilities and the knowledge level of guides were rated poorly for Kanger Ghati. The Interpretation Centre needs to be strategically located near ticket counters or waiting halls, so that they can be effectively utilised. Littering and lack of hygiene was a common remark for all protected areas.
- While tourists to Achanakmar and Barnawapara showed keen interest in wildlife, Kanger Ghati received casual visitors. The reason could be poor wildlife visibility. The older visitors (above 56 years) lacked interest in conservation issues. Sensitisation of tourists is necessary to broaden their perspective so that visitor satisfaction is achieved from all the positive attributes of forests and not just wildlife viewing.
- Visitor feedback mechanism, crisis management, online booking facilities have not been given due importance.
- More than 60% of the total budget for management comes from the State Government. Although Achanakmar receives much more budget (11.41 crores/year) than Barnawapara (5.26 crores/year) and Kanger Ghati (5.58 crores/year), its percentage spending on ecotourism is the least (2.32%). The revenue realised through ecotourism is also the least in Achanakmar (0.06 crores/year).
- Lack of separate ecotourism managers, shortage of field staff, posting of staff who are on the verge of retirement, short tenures, lack of training, meagre budget for staff welfare and general demotivation to work in protected areas are the issues common in all the study areas.
- Socio-economic condition of local communities living in and around protected areas is characterised by low literacy levels, rainfed agriculture with average land holdings of less than 2 acres, seasonal labour works, meagre income of up to Rs.50,000/- per annum and high dependence on forests. Most of them are unaware of Joint Forest Management Committee and its activities. Funding for community development activities was found lacking. Eco development committees were found to be non-existent (mandatory in protected areas as per the guidelines of National Tiger Conservation Authority, 2012).
- The response of local communities to ecotourism was positive although their involvement was restricted only to jungle safari. The Achanakmar model is more robust as the safari gypsies are owned and managed by Forest Protection Committees (FPC's). In Kanger Ghati and Barnawapara, the benefits are restricted only to a few individuals.

Analysis of the income of safari drivers reveal that ecotourism has helped improve their economic conditions.

Sl.no	Protected Area	Income during tourist season (in Rs)		Income from other sources in Rs (labour and agriculture)		Annual income before becoming safari drivers (in Rs)	Annual income after becoming safari drivers (in Rs)
		Per month	Per season	Per month	Per year		
1	Achanakmar*	7000	49,000	5000-10,000	60,000-1,20,000	60,000-1,20,000	1,09,000-1,69,000
2	Kanger Ghati*	44,000	1,76,000	5000-10,000	60,000-1,20,000	60,000-1,20,000	2,36,000-2,96,000
3	Barnawapara*	43,600	1,74,000	5000	60,000	30,000	2,04,000

*Achanakmar: Rs.7000/- fixed from Nov-May**.**

*****Kangerghati: Rs.1100/trip for two trips /day for 20 days for four months or 1,76,000/- from November- Feb.

*Barnawapara: Rs. 545/trip for four trips /day for 20 days for four months or Rs.1,74,000/- November- Feb.

Analysis of the income of guides reveals that ecotourism has, to a certain extent, helped improve the economic conditions.

Sl.no	Protected Area	Income during tourist season in Rs		Income from other sources in Rs (labour and agriculture)		Annual income before becoming guides in Rs	Annual income after becoming guide in Rs
		Per month	Per season	Per month	Per season		
1	Achanakmar*	5000-10,000	25,000-50,000	5000-10,000	60,000-1,20,000	60,000-1,20,000	85,000-1,70,000
2	Kanger Ghati*	5000	30,000-40,000	5000-10,000	60,000-1,20,000	60,000-1,20,000	90,000-1,60,000
3	Barnawapara*	5000	30,000-40,000	5000	60,000	60,000	90,000-1,00,000

* Achanakmar: Rs. 300/trip from Nov-May.

* Kanger Ghati: Rs. 150/trip from Nov-May.

* Barnawapara: Rs.200/ trip from Nov-May.

- Women in Achanakmar were found to manage safari trips independently. In Kanger Ghati and Barnawapara, involvement of women is nil.
- Analysis of the natural resource dependency of resorts indicate that they are neither ecologically sustainable nor do they contribute to conservation in any manner. Similar findings were seen in hotels/eateries as these establishments heavily utilised the natural resources of the area.
- Homestays in Kanger Ghati were much more economical, ecologically and socially sustainable when compared to resorts. However, regular training programmes and awareness creation among the homestay owners are required to make them sustainable in the long run.

Policy level.

Analysis of the state policy revealed that the percentage compliance of Chhattisgarh Draft Ecotourism Policy, 2020 to the national ecotourism guidelines is only 42%. The policy does not promote processes for local communities to control and maintain their resources, ensure community-based tourism initiatives, obtain "Informed Consent" of local bodies for ecotourism ventures, and assign any role for gender in resource management. Concept of zonation, regulation of infrastructural development, role of stakeholders, legislation to enforce standards to minimize adverse impacts, model for revenue sharing and charging of conservation cess, legislation to ensure CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities and mechanisms for eco-certification of ventures have failed to find a place in the policy. Issues like visitor safety, developing effective education and interpretation plan have not been dealt upon.

The way forward

Strategies like dividing the ecotourism area into zones, to satisfy different tourism needs and avoiding concentration of tourists (Thenmala model, Kerala), restricting tourism routes and vehicles, mandating forest guides in vehicles as in Corbett, Uttarakhand, creating revolving funds from revenue received and utilising the funds for development of villages around the Protected areas, developing differential pricing policy for domestic and foreign visitors as in Kanha, Madhya Pradesh, providing packages focussing on forest experiences rather than just wildlife viewing (Jungle Lodges and Resorts model, Karnataka), developing revenue sharing mechanisms among stakeholders in community-based ecotourism ventures such as Mangalajodi, Orissa, strengthening Eco-development committees to manage ecotourism sites

as in Parambikulam & Periyar tiger reserves in Kerala, developing tribal rehabilitation programmes though ecotourism as in Wayanad, Kerala, strengthening local bodies to decide and manage tourism as in Khonoma village, Nagaland & Kokerebellur, Karnataka, encouraging Non-Government Organisations to strengthen local communities to manage their ecotourism ventures as in Uravu, Wyanad & Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, Sikkim and encouraging public private partnership to manage natural resources (Blue Yonder, Kerala) can help develop a robust ecotourism model for Chhattisgarh.

Contributions

The study suggests suitable management interventions at the protected area management level and the policy level, to promote sustainable ecotourism management in the Chhattisgarh.

Limitations

The study was limited to three protected areas selected for the study. The findings have been extrapolated for the entire State. The data collection was done with the help of students who are well-versed in the local language and the subject. Even though all precautions have been taken, as majority of the respondents possess only basic education, there is a possibility that the questions posed and the responses given by them, have not been properly captured. Responses related to income levels and profits may be understated.

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